



1994 - 2023

Record-breaking 30 consecutive
centuries of domestic winners

Our Winners Tell the Tale

Johnston Racing Ltd Kingsley Park Middleham

North Yorkshire DL8 4QZ 01969 622 237

info@johnston.racing

www.johnston.racing

Off the Bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

WITH APOLOGIES for returning to one of my favourite themes, or bugbears to be honest, I was disappointed that no-one responded to my request last month for clarification as to the source of the prize-money being paid by the Racing League.

At a time when the industry is considering radical changes to the fixture list, with a view to presenting racing 'in a way which delivers tangible long-term benefits across the entire industry', to quote Julie Harrington, isn't it remarkable that, for a third time, the BHA consented to allow TRL to stage six,

summer evening fixtures in addition to the existing programme?

Their motivation in doing so, presumably, lies in welcoming the additional prize-money which TRL brings to the sport. That's all well and good, but surely we need to know the source of that prize-money, and whether if TRL did not exist, those funds would still come to the industry in some other way.

So I'm calling on the BHA, the racing media and TRL themselves to clarify the position for me. Who's footing the bill, and why?

AMONG THE core principles for innovation and improvement in the 2024 fixture list approved by the BHA Board in May 2023, was the introduction of a 'two-hour "shop window" on most Saturday afternoons with three fixtures, including up to two Premier fixtures, taking place during the peak customer engagement period (usually 2pm-4pm). Other Saturday fixtures will take place outside the protected window.'

The BHA Industry Strategy document on 'the racing product' explains their view that restricting Saturday afternoons in this way 'gives the sport space to breathe and for broadcasters to tell their stories.' It also claims that 'spreading races more evenly across Saturdays will help generate increased revenue through additional Levy and media rights payments.'

There is nothing I can do to alter this, and the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. To be clear, I have no objection to the 'premierisation' of racing fixtures, indeed the more attention that can be focused on our historic races the better, but I feel it is necessary to express my reservation to the shop window proposal in very simple terms.

I have been writing about horse racing for nigh on 25 years. The sport is never far from my mind. In addition to writing for the Klarion I maintain a daily database covering all Johnston Racing's runners. I take an interest in the bloodstock sales, read the Racing Post online, review racing books and attend racing regularly. I have even tailored family holidays over the years to avoid missing Klarion deadlines at the end of each month.

But here's the thing. Even at the age of 65, and even

though I am so involved in racing matters, I have plenty of other interests and demands on my time aside from racing, especially on Saturday afternoons. So at whom is this proposal aimed, if not to someone like me who is already interested and supportive of the sport? In one word, punters. That's the only way in which 'increased revenue' can be achieved.

The vision of the Saturday punter which this paints to me, namely of someone prepared to sit all day on a Saturday watching TV, glued to internet betting sites and punting for hours on end, is neither an attractive nor a realistic one. Surely, even the most committed punter does not operate in this way. We are told constantly of how habits are changing in the way we consume media; we use streaming services to watch content when it suits us; we're told that young people are not prepared to abide by television schedules to watch programmes but will use a multiplicity of devices to watch where and when they please.

Are the BHA really saying that, cracking open another can of Super Lager, the average punter will invest in bets at 11 o'clock on a Saturday morning or at 9.30pm at night just because he or she can, and that they will increase their betting 'spend' just because racing is spread out across the day?

It's sad that the interests of loyal and regular racegoers at places such as Thirsk and Chester, who are likely to be affected by fixtures being shifted to unsuitable times, are placed behind an obvious attempt to boost the betting industry.

Sadly, some would say, it was ever thus.

ON AUGUST 25, the Racing Post reported that the Betting and Gambling Commission (BGC) had issued a revised figure for the betting industry's annual contribution to racing after concerns were raised about the accuracy of their initial figure.

The difference in the figures came from a miscalculation of media rights payments to racecourses. The 2022 figure was

£270m. The BGC had previously estimated this at £340m.

What interested me was that Bill Barber reported that 'Racing's leaders and media rights companies had questioned the BGC's original figure, saying it did not tally with their numbers'.

In the interests of transparency and accuracy, would they like to share their numbers with us?